Five Principles of Readability

Readability refers to the general ease with which readers can understand and remember sentences. Diction (our terms) and syntax (the order in which we place the words) affect readability. If readers understand who is performing the action in a sentence, what the action entails, and who or what the action affects, they will probably understand the writer's meaning. In most situations—from technical reports and research articles to magazine articles and news releases—readers (and editors) appreciate clarity and concision, so follow these principles unless you have a good reason for deviating from them. Remember also that they are *principles*, not *rules*. *Principles* guide and shape action, but they are not inviolable when circumstances call for more complex diction and syntax.

Principle One

Sentences that have a **subject**-verb-object order are more readable than those that don't.

Better: The American Concrete Institute recommends the technique.
S V O

Worse: The technique was recommended by the American Concrete Institute.
O V S

Principle Two

When possible, put the agent (subject) and action (verb) close together in the sentence.

Better: Modified by a chemical process, the ash strengthens the asphalt.
S V O

Worse: The ash, modified by a chemical process, strengthens the asphalt.
S V O

Principle Three

Keep modifiers and the words they modify close together in the sentence.

Better: Prone to non-linear fissures and cracks, the asphalt is difficult to cut.
(modifying phrase) (modified)

Worse: Prone to non-linear fissures and cracks, it was difficult to cut the asphalt.
(modifying phrase) (modified)

Principle Four

Whenever possible, put people in the subject position in the sentence.

Better: Three teams of engineers tested the slag.
S V O

Worse: The slag was tested with multiple measures under harsh conditions.
S V

(The issue)

Principle Five

Put old information first in a sentence, new information last.

Better: Business school professors perennially debate over whether maintaining an old employee is more costly than hiring a new one. The issue has strong proponents on each side.

(The debate over hiring a new employee)

(The issue)

Worse: Business school professors perennially debate over whether maintaining an old employee is more costly than hiring a new one. Strong proponents are on each side of the issue.

(The debate over hiring a new employee)